

'I will not vote for this'

DuPage County Board members unified in distaste for doomsday budget

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Anything but this.

That seems to be the consensus among DuPage County Board members on Chairman Robert Schillerstrom's doomsday budget.

In a rare moment of unity on the oft-divided board, 15 out of 18 leaders polled by the Daily Herald expressed distaste for the fiscal plan that calls for 235 layoffs. Nine board members said they'd turn down the proposal as it stands.

"I will not vote for this budget," said Finance Committee Chairman Pat O'Shea, who vows to find some other source of revenue. "I think these are Draconian cuts."

Others still are digesting the 438-page document presented last week.

The fiscal plan is \$50 million less than the 2007 budget and cuts deep into law enforcement, health and human services, as well as programs such as the household hazardous waste center in Naperville.

"I think it's very unacceptable," said board member Yolanda Campuzano of Bensenville. "It's very disturbing it's come down to this."

County officials had delayed the budget, hoping the General Assembly would come through with a cigarette tax to raise millions in new revenues, but that option looks shaky.

To avoid the pain, some emerging solutions from board members are a vehicle sticker fee, elimination of some perks and consolidating departments.

Many opined that when a budget passes by the end of November, it will have their stamp on it.

"All things are possible on the county board," board member Linda Kurzawa of Winfield said, "if you have the majority vote."

Sticker shock

So how can the board avert a doomsday scenario?

A vehicle sticker is "our only option," board member Kyle Gilgis of Downers Grove contends.

DuPage lacks home rule authority. So its powers of taxation are limited. A fee on vehicles, however, is something board members can do.

This summer, finance staff estimated if the county charged \$50 a car, for example, it could generate \$40 million annually.

Board member Pam Rion of Bloomingdale recognized a sticker won't be wildly popular, but "we can't do anything else," she said.

"It's time for political courage," Rion said. "I'm willing to take the plunge because Springfield let us down."

While some are renewing calls to ask voters to approve a sales tax increase to fund public safety, "referendums are not guaranteed," board member Jim Zay of Carol Stream said.

He, too, called a vehicle sticker an option worth considering.

But officials noted details remain to be worked out, such as who collects the fee, how much it would cost and whether there should be exemptions.

O'Shea, of Lombard, says with the General Assembly yet to call it quits for 2007, "the cigarette tax is very much alive."

And, "if it doesn't pass, I'll come up with another revenue source," he promised.

But board member Tom Bennington of Downers Grove cautioned that the financial cavalry won't be in time for the 2008 budget.

"You're not going to see a new revenue source come in time for this budget," he said.

Unsatisfactory as it is, board member Jeff Redick of Elmhurst said at least the budget doesn't advocate spending money the county doesn't have.

"It's where we are now," Redick said. "It's a starting point."

Looking for Plan B

Several board members offered alternatives to reduce costs.

Zay proposed combining the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management with the sheriff's department, offering furlough to nonessential employees, reducing computer and technology purchases and freezing out-of-state travel.

"There's still some room for maneuvering," he said.

Board member J.R. McBride of Glen Ellyn believes it's time to cut back on perks for elected officials, such as reimbursement for mileage and stipends for serving as committee chairmen and vice chairmen.

"Mileage -- that's laughable," he said. "This is supposed to be about public service."

Board member Michael Connelly of Lisle agreed with the stipend elimination and suggested reconsidering a vote to give board members, who earn \$48,620 a year, a 3 percent raise in 2008.

"We all need to share the pain," Connelly said.

Several officials brought up an idea that's caused controversy in the past -- reducing the number of sheriff's patrol officers in unincorporated areas by hiring municipal police.

But others questioned if the plan would cost more money than it saves.

The budget plan already suggests dropping 179 jobs in law enforcement, including 100 sheriff's office employees.

It also proposes a roughly \$2.6 million reduction in funds to the health department.

Kurzawa is health board president and also has a husband who served with the sheriff's department; her son is a police officer.

"I see the importance of both," she said.

But she said she fears there's a "public safety versus public health" showdown looming.

"It's a ridiculous debate," she said.

Several board members have said if push comes to shove, public safety is first.

"We need to make sure we fund law enforcement, everything else is an extra," board member Brien Sheahan of Elmhurst said.

Grant Eckhoff of Wheaton also noted, "We've got to focus on what's essential -- the state's attorney's office, the courthouse, the public defender, the sheriff."

But others point to the growing numbers of people living in DuPage either without health insurance or with insufficient benefits.

Dismissing health care is "naive," Rion said, explaining that reductions in mental health services, for example, will increase the number of people in jail.

"If the health department didn't serve the public," Kurzawa said, "eventually the burden would show up on your streets."

Messy finish

The health care/law enforcement dichotomy isn't the only tension out there.

Newer members of the board don't fault the General Assembly for failing to pass a cigarette tax. They blame their colleagues, saying the board imprudently lowered tax rates in the past.

"It's not appropriate to blame (state) legislators for our problems; these are home-grown issues," Sheahan said.

Veteran board members counter that the board raised property taxes recently and has been frugal.

"We've eliminated the fluff. We've already cut everything to the bone," Kurzawa said.

What's certain is that the next few weeks will be painful.

"I'm disappointed we have to do a budget like this," board member Don Puchalski of Addison said. "I feel sorry for people who may lose their jobs, and I hope something will happen to alleviate this."

"Right now, I'm not in favor of the budget," board member Debra Olson of Wheaton said. "But I have nothing to tell you that is an alternative."

Despite all the angst at the county offices, there's been a curious lack of response from the public, noted Gilgis, saying, "I'm surprised my phone's not ringing off the hook."